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TORCHES MOUNTED ON the dock's pilings flickered and leapt in the breeze that blew in off the Western Ocean. Moonlight silvered the tips of the choppy sea. Bare-chested Stygians worked in the night air, making a sleek black galley ready to sail. None of them knew who would travel on the dark craft. But they all knew enough to know not to ask questions about it. There were things, they understood, that it was better not to show any curiosity about, especially where the sons of the snake god Set were involved. When the ship was ready, three men in long, black robes emerged from the benighted shadows and strode silently up the gangplank.

When they boarded, no sane man wanted to stay on the ship. It was as if the three acolytes went about

surrounded by a miasma of terror that drove all others away. The last man on board, high in the riggings making fast the black vertical mainsail, felt the presence of the three dark figures below. He rushed through his last knot and dove into the water rather than step onto the deck with them for even a second.

As he climbed out of the warm water and onto the dock, the other workers stood watching the ship. They were sure that it would go nowhere. All the winds were blowing in off the sea, and, although the ship was a bireme, the three had no galley slaves on board to row them out. But when one of them released the last line holding ship to dock, the ship began to drift away from shore, in spite of the waves that should have been pushing it back. To everyone's astonishment, the sails filled with wind that no one on land could feel—wind that seemed to be blowing off the shore and out toward empty sea, a complete reversal of the breezes all had felt during the course of their work. The sleek ship cut swiftly through the water, and within minutes it was out of sight, black on black.

No ship had ever sailed so rapidly, the men on the dock knew.

At least, not without help.

IN ALL OF his sixteen years, Kral had never seen so much armor.

Back home, the Pictish men fought naked, or wearing a loincloth. And the settlers they battled mostly wore leathers or buckskins, sometimes combined with shirts of mail.

But here in Tarantia, sitting on the ground looking up at Aquilonian soldiers, he saw breastplates of solid steel. Most were plain, but a couple had designs worked into the metal, the same lion insignia that showed on Aquilonian flags.

He couldn't help wondering how strong the steel was. Could a knife pierce it? An arrow? How did a man walk upright with so much weight on his shoulders, instead of on all fours like a tortoise in its shell? And how could any force stand up to an army so protected?

It looked like he might find out.

Three Rangers on one side of him—men who had fought against Picts, and hated them. Seven soldiers on the other side—more of them, better armed and armored, but men who still stared in amazement that a young Pict was sprawled in the street before them.

He picked the Rangers. They and their kind, after all, had slaughtered his clan. He owed them.

His knife had slid a couple of feet away when he had fallen. He still clutched the sword borrowed from Alanya's friend Cheveray. But a sword was an unfamiliar weapon to Kral, one he had little experience fighting with. His opponents had stopped far enough back to give him some time to make his move. Keeping his eyes trained on the soldiers, he

sprang and twisted, like a cat turning to land on its feet. He scooped up the knife, fainted once toward the soldiers, then propelled himself backward, at the last minute turning again. He had fixed the positions of the three Rangers in his mind. When he could see them again, he found that none of them had moved far from where they had been.

He landed between the two on his right side. One of them was in motion toward him with his sword out, point first. Kral flicked his sword's blade at that one, to hold him at bay. The second still gawped at Kral, surprised that he was so near. As Kral had hoped, the Rangers had been certain he would go toward the soldiers.

Kral dodged the first one's blade and charged the second. This one raised a sword, but too slowly. Kral leapt upon him like a furious panther and drove his knife deep into the man's upper chest, just below the collarbone. The Ranger bellowed in pain, and his sword clattered to the cobbled street. The third Ranger rushed toward them, but Kral let his sword fall and tugged the wounded Ranger around. He used the man as a shield, to keep the other two from attacking. The wounded one tried to grab Kral's arms, but the Pict twisted his knife. Agony weakened the Ranger's knees.

Kral shoved the injured Ranger into his comrades. The three of them collided in a tangle of limbs, slipping on the blood-slicked street. Covered by their confusion, Kral broke into a sprint.

Behind him, he heard the thunder of booted feet on pavement and the sounds of voices shouting Aquilonian words he couldn't understand. He raced down the nearest street, turning left at the first corner he came to. It was a narrow alley that curved around, with the far end out of sight. Kral hoped it was not another blind alley. As he rounded the bend, he saw that the other side did open onto a street—this one busier by far than most he'd seen that night.

He drew up short and clung to the shadowed wall. A nearly naked Pict, dark of hair and bronze of skin, bursting into such a crowd, would almost certainly create a commotion. Since his goal was just the opposite—to hide, to slip away unseen—he was hesitant to show himself.

On the other hand, the soldiers and Rangers he had eluded couldn't be far behind. What difference would a few raised eyebrows make if he were to be gutted like a fish either way?

After another moment's consideration, he decided to try to make a bad situation into an advantage. He hurled himself out of the dark alley into the midst of the crowd in the street. A few surprised shouts met his sudden appearance, growing in number and volume as he twisted and wound through the throng. Kral grabbed at women's arms and swatted men on their rears, laughing crazily the whole time.

By the time his pursuers reached the street, it was in chaos. Nobody seemed to know if Kral was a

threat or a clown, but the normal patterns of traffic had been disrupted. When a clutch of armed warriors appeared from an alleyway, the crowd's response was near panic. People who had been good-naturedly accepting of Kral's antics realized that something more serious was going on. Everyone tried to see where the Pict had gone.

Kral had almost broken through to a quieter street on the far side of the road when the alarm went up. He had a final, small clutch of people to avoid. When the soldiers started shouting to the people in the street, one of the group pointed at Kral, who was just about to duck around them. Another one reacted quickly enough to shove a walking stick between Kral's legs as he ran.

Kral's trailing leg hit the stick, and the force of it was just enough to trip him, sending him flying into the corner of the stone building at the intersection. He bounced off the wall, bloodied and dazed. He staggered a few more steps down the road, then one of the soldiers was upon him. He slammed Kral to the ground and hurled himself on top of him. His armor pressed down on Kral like a boulder's weight. But Kral reached around behind him with his knife, desperately poking and prodding, looking for a weak spot.

He found it where the top of the man's armor stopped and the neckguard of his helmet was tipped away by the angle at which he lay atop Kral. He

jammed the point of his knife there, found soft, yielding flesh. The man stiffened and rolled away, bellowing with pain. Kral lurched after him, grabbing the man's helmeted head in a powerful grip. He wrenched until he heard bones crack. Violent circumstance had made Kral a killer, and though he took no pleasure in it, he would do whatever was necessary to preserve his freedom and continue his quest.

By the time he rose again, the rest of the soldiers and the Rangers had reached him. A soldier's booted foot drove into his temple. Bright flashes filled his eyes, and he went sprawling in the street a third time. When his vision cleared, he was surrounded, the points of weapons like a forest of blades directed toward him.

He knew resistance at that point would only get him killed. Kral preferred to live. To fight another day.

"Stand up, savage," one of the men growled.

Kral shot the speaker an angry glance. It was one of the Aquilonian soldiers, a slight man with a lean face and a sharp beak of a nose. His eyes glimmered with rage as he glared at Kral. The Pict was sure he had never seen the man before tonight, never done anything to hurt him or his loved ones. And yet, the man looked as if he'd be happier splitting Kral down the middle than looking at him for another second. A couple of the other soldiers tended to the body of their slain comrade.

"What's he done?" another soldier asked.

“Killed our employer, it seems,” one of the unwounded Rangers said. Kral found that he could understand most of what they said when they spoke in ordinary terms. His lessons with Alanya had borne fruit.

“I would not be surprised,” the soldier replied. “This one is no stranger to killing, is he? Did anyone witness the crime?”

“None that I know,” the Ranger said bitterly. “But this one, and two others, were there. They ran when they saw us. Our employer, and a fellow Ranger, were both dead.”

“Well, we’ll lock him up and sort it out,” the soldier said.

“You could simply turn him loose in our care,” the injured Ranger said. Blood had splashed down the front of his tunic, and he held his hand over his wound, pressing a strip of cloth to it.

“Maybe we could have before,” the soldier said. “But he’s killed one of our own now. And since half the people in the city have seen him, we prefer to do it the right way. We will turn him over to the city guard. If you want to petition them to release him, have at it.”

The Rangers grumbled some but finally relented. No one asked Kral what his preference would be; but then, he hadn’t expected them to. Two soldiers grabbed his arms and roughly hoisted him to his feet. The Ranger he had stabbed walked up to him as if to run him through. A couple of soldiers moved to

intercede, and the Ranger settled for a glancing blow to Kral's cheek with his left fist. Kral tasted blood, then he was yanked away from the Rangers and down the dark, quiet road.

ALANYA WALKED, SLOWLY and sadly, the last few blocks to Cheveray's house. She wanted to let her breathing and heart rate return to something approaching normal. She had avoided her pursuers, but she hadn't seen any sign of Donial or Kral. She guessed that both would find their way back as well. Of Donial, she had no doubt. He knew the city as well as anyone, and he was quick enough to evade pursuit. She worried more about her Pictish friend, Kral, who was not only a stranger in Tarantia, but seemed a bit overwhelmed by the city's size. So far, his survival skills had seemed unparalleled, however, so she still held on to hope.

When she reached Cheveray's street, she saw her brother silhouetted against the glow of a lantern mounted on their friend's gate. She rushed to him and wrapped him in a hug that he accepted grudgingly. "I'm so glad to see you, Donial," she said.

"Any sign of Kral?" he asked, his big dark eyes blinking in the lantern's light. His thick shock of black hair was tousled from the run, his pale cheeks red with effort. He looked younger than his fourteen years at that moment. She guessed she didn't look

much better, and ran fingers through her long blond hair. A single year older than he but, with both their parents dead, she was all he had. Her responsibility.

“I haven’t seen him. Maybe he’s inside already.”

“He could never have beaten me here,” Donial pointed out. Alanya knew he was right. Even if Donial had taken a more roundabout route back, he was a faster runner than Kral. And he had known where he was going. She felt a sharp pain tug at her. What if something had happened to Kral? After all he had done for her, had she inadvertently delivered him into disaster?

Together, they went quietly into Cheveray’s house, which was dark at that hour. Alanya sat in the older man’s front room, but Donial seemed full of nervous energy. He paced the floor, sat for a few seconds, then jumped up and paced some more.

After a short while, Cheveray himself appeared, bearing a candle in the hand that didn’t hold his cane. He wore white nightclothes and cap, and, with his silver hair and hunched-over posture he looked like some kind of crooked ghost. “Well, children,” he said as he entered the room. “What news? Where is your Pictish friend?”

“We don’t know, Cheveray,” Alanya said gloomily. “He hasn’t returned yet. I don’t know if he’s lost in the city, or captured, or what.”

“Captured?” Cheveray echoed. “You were seen, then?”

“Aye,” Donial replied. “My fault. I sneezed, just as we were leaving. Dust in the air, or something, I guess, but I couldn’t contain it.”

“Rangers gave chase,” Alanya said, taking up the narrative. “Uncle Lupinius is dead. Slain by unknown murderers, though he yet lived when we arrived. But only for a few moments. Long enough to tell us that the Pictish crown Kral seeks has been stolen. We were leaving Father’s house—our house, then, having found my mirror. The house, by all rights, should be mine, and we determined to come back here and talk to you about how to stake my claim. But as Donial said, on our way out we were seen. We split up, to confound our pursuers. Donial and I made our way back here, but we have seen no sign of Kral since.”

“I am sorry about your uncle,” Cheveray said. “In spite of everything that has happened, he was family, after all.”

“I know,” Donial said. His expression was sad, his voice subdued in spite of his apparent agitation. “I feel like I should hate him. But seeing him there, injured. Dying. It was awful.”

“It always is,” Cheveray told them. “Death. We all strive to avoid it, yet finally we greet it, happily or not. I am sure you both were sickened to see your uncle that way, and you unable to help him.”

“We tried,” Alanya put in. “But we were too late.”

“I am certain you did what you could. A most

unfortunate situation. As for your friend, he may yet show up.” His warm smile never failed to make Alanya feel better. It did so now as well, in spite of the emotionally wearing night. “It has not been that long, and he is, after all, a stranger here. But he’s also a resourceful fellow, unless I have completely lost the knack of judging character.”

“He is that,” Alanya agreed.

“Then give him a bit more time before you worry,” Cheveray said. He put a calming hand on Alanya’s shoulder, and she pressed it down with her own. “If he is not here by morning, I’ll make some discreet inquiries. Worry not, we shall find him.”

Alanya, as always, took comfort from Cheveray’s steadiness and uncompromising common sense. She still feared for Kral, but she would wait to panic. Maybe, as Cheveray suggested, everything would be put right by morning.

Or as much as could be done, at any rate. Nothing would bring back her father.

Or her uncle.